An Undulating and Polycentric Web of Faithfulness: Exploring the Unfolding of World Christianity with Peter C. Phan

Peter Phan's foresight in concluding his well-known essay, "World Christianity: Its Implications for History, Religious Studies, and Theology" with a caution is noteworthy—especially in the tumultuous year of 2025, as he noted, "prognosticating the future of religions" and that of World Christianity "is an extremely hazardous business."[1] Despite the breadth and interdisciplinary acumen that characterizes Phan's survey of the (now no longer so new) "buzzword 'World Christianity,'"[2] his reticence regarding the future of World Christianity can be particularly appreciated today, over a decade later. We now inhabit a global moment of surging ethno-nationalisms, of runaway economic inequality, and of increasingly uninhibited populisms that unwittingly funnel power and resources ever more snugly into the hands of patriarchal techno-oligarchies. Our whole planetary community tries to grapple with the intertwining ecological and migratory emergencies amidst the "wild west" of mushrooming artificial intelligence that is already starting to permeate all arenas of life. In these circumstances, over a decade later, World Christianity indeed remains "nebulous," both in its diverse material incarnations as well as in its theological and cultural expressions; "its implications for church and academy" still remain in the status of "to be spelled out"[3] as Phan concluded back in 2012.

In one sense, not so much has radically changed since 2012: the momentum of growth for Christian communities is still gaining ground in the "Majority World" or the so-called "Two-

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[1] See Peter C. Phan, "World Christianity: Its Implications for History, Religious Studies, and Theology," *Horizons* 39, no. 2 (2012): 171–188, here 187.

[2] Phan, "World Christianity," 171.

[3] Phan, "World Christianity," 172.

Thirds World," and simultaneously shifting away from the modern centers of theological, ecclesial, and demographic power in the Euro-Atlantic "West." The recognition that the Eurocentric and colonial version of Christendom had "masked [the] diversity and multiplicity" of Christianity "in favor [of] an imagined and often enforced uniformity"[4] from the Western centers toward various colonial peripheries is continuing on the trajectory that Phan captured with clarity and conciseness. In circles of historical and constructive Christian scholarship as well as among the theologically engaged grassroot practitioners it is increasingly realized, as Phan already summarized, that, "There is not, nor has there ever been, *one* Christianity; rather there exist Christianities (in plural), all over the world and all the time"[5] even when the enduring pernicious legacies of the modern Western colonial designs of political and spiritual conquest are not whitewashed but rather recognized for what they were and, in some contexts, still are – the designs of cultural imperialism and socioeconomic domination.

In another sense, the trajectory that Phan draws of the nexus of inculturation/contextualization and the (emerging?) polycentric normativity seems to have landed on a considerably more ambiguous terrain in the middle of the third decade of the twenty-first century. Phan summarizes that, "In 'World Christianity' no one form of inculturated Christianity is privileged and normative for another … Each of the local incarnations of Christianity embodies, in its own unique way, Christianity wholly but not perfectly, and all of them make up World Christianity" so that it is not "something ontologically prior to its local realizations, floating above history like a Platonic form, but rather is constituted into existence by each of its

[4] Phan, "World Christianity," 175; emphasis in the original.

[5] Phan, "World Christianity," 175.

spatial and temporal realizations."[6] It is at this juncture that Phan, rightfully, argues that this state of affairs entails a different approach for the study of Christianity among other religions, for the historical study of Christianity as well as the ongoing endeavor of Christian theology.[7]

And it is also at this juncture that it becomes important to highlight some further areas of exploration in spelling out those above mentioned "implications" that Phan gestures toward. Here I would like to focus on the cluster of motifs that Phan alludes to in the section on "World Christianity and a New Way of Doing Christian Theology?" but which currently call for a more robust engagement within the field of World Christianity. In the course of the following reflection, I proceed on the assumption of broad agreement with World Christianity's methodological and disciplinary critiques of the conventional (i.e. Eurocentric) modes of studying "church history" that Phan surveys. The agreement includes the distinction he employs between "Christianity as a world religion [which] is not identical with World Christianity"[8] as well as with his argument that "the connotation of 'Christianity' is wider than that of 'Church'" since World Christianity indeed ought to have "room for … these non-church movements and these Jesus-but-non-Christian people,"[9] however these historical and contemporary spiritual movements are articulated and categorized.

In short, some recent areas worthy of further interrogation within the current horizons of World Christianity are the following motifs: inculturation and interculturation, the interreligious turn of theological inquiry, and the role of postcolonial and decolonial theological critiques.

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[6] Phan, "World Christianity," 176.

[7] Phan, "World Christianity," 176.

[8] Phan, "World Christianity," 180.

[9] Phan, "World Christianity," 179.

Rather than theologizing from specific trinitarian doctrines or from the topic of universal salvation in an interreligious context, which Phan addressed in his article, I focus upon the methodological aspects of theologizing from within the horizons of World Christianity itself

Beyond Inculturation: Christianity and Interculturation in a Moment of Identitarian Ideologies

Phan's argument that, "In 'World Christianity' no one form of inculturated Christianity is privileged and normative for another" may strike readers as more aspirational than descriptive of the present state of affairs within the actual ecclesial power relations and enduring colonial "global designs," to use Walter Mignolo's description of the asymmetric and exploitative intertwinement of Western modernity and coloniality.[10] Picture theological and ecclesiological fixtures—all the recent fissures and fractures notwithstanding—such as, for example, the core theological and liturgical tenets of the Roman Catholic magisterium or the Lutheran Book of Concord or the Anglican tradition's Book of Common Prayer with their deep, often unconscious, rootedness in the European cultural, intellectual, and political histories—as always and already "inculturated" forms of World Christianity. While such an imaginative exercise is timely and, I submit, theologically indispensable from both historical and constructive perspectives in all theological fields and disciplines well beyond "church history," it is still an exercise that is far from normative and by no means organically emerging, both in One-Third as well as in the Two-Thirds Worlds.

[10] See Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledge, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

It would be unhelpful to understate the tensions that characterize World Christianity—the actual communities of the faithful, not the academic field reflecting on their life and faith. Raimundo Barreto observes, "Christianity can no longer be conceived as a Western religion."[11] At least it is not such a religion ontologically or universally. Furthermore, "Conversion to Christianity, especially in former Western colonies, can no longer be conceived as the result of the Westernization of converts," as the non-Western "indigenous cultures and spiritualities that at some point were expected to disappear remain alive and strong."[12]

Recent demographic shifts and the rapid growth of Christianity in the Majority World and its diasporas in the North-Atlantic cultural milieu are also shifting the theological and ecclesiological power differentials. Some prominent recent disagreements about the role of women clergy, especially in the ranks of the episcopate in the Anglican Communion, and the impact of the Majority World member churches on the divisions in the United Methodist Church regarding the role of LGBTQ members and clergy illustrate these changing power differentials quite strikingly. Historically and contextually nuanced attention is necessary to delink sound and fruitful theological analyses from both "West"-centric neocolonial inertias of self-ascribed universal superiority and also from some overly optimistic and simplistic postcolonial overcompensation in the former imperial centers of power.

The current academic field of World Christianity is, arguably, uniquely well-positioned to interrogate what happens when the former imperial peripheries "pray back" and "theologize

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[11] Raimundo C. Barreto, "The World Christianity and Public Religion Series," *World Christianity, Urbanization, and Identity,* World Christianity and Public Religion Series, vol. 3, ed. Moses O. Biney, Kenneth N. Ngwa, Raimundo C. Barreto (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021), ix.

[12] Barreto, "The World Christianity and Public Religion Series," ix.

back."[13] If indeed all forms of Christianity are always and already inculturated—as they truly are—and if none is privileged and normative for another as Phan states is the case for World Christianity, then how might the classic trope of inculturation need to be reconceived? Can the language of *in*-culturation, so prominent since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s in the Roman Catholic ecclesial context (and still so controversial in traditionalist circles), which serves as Phan's primary point of reference and which still remains a dominant paradigm in the mainstream "West"-centered ecumenical liturgical theology in the aftermath of the twentieth century Liturgical Movement, still meaningfully represent the emerging polycentric normativity under the paradigm Phan ascribes to World Christianity? The unilateral directionality of the "in" in "inculturation" carries often unexamined legacies of providential messianism that historically went hand-in-hand with the coloniality of power manifested through Christian missions, "discoveries," and conquests. These imaginaries of dominance persist in cultural and theological imaginaries of the hierarchical relations that employ the dynamic of center vs. peripheries/margins. They also persist in the spooky, yet ruthlessly functional remnants of the theopolitics of the doctrine of discovery in North America and on other continents. The inculturation language and directionality does not transform these underlying impediments. A more effective movement into a new paradigm is represented by collaborative and more intentionally multi-sourced and multi-lateral efforts such as, for example, the collection of essays

[13] I refer here to the groundbreaking, now classic, postcolonial analysis by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989).

Majority World Theology: Christian Doctrine in Global Context[14] which offers an alternative approach to doing systematic theology through a more decentered lens of authority.

But there is more to consider. How might the tropes of privilege and normativity be reconceived to assist with transforming the unidirectional and habitually top-down/center-periphery "in"-culturation toward a different pattern of relational authority in which doctrines, rites, philosophical and cultural ideas, and spiritual practices would *inter*-culturate in a more reciprocal way? That is to say, to crosspollinate, to hybridize one another and potentially reshape what used to be the "top" or the "center?" What is at stake here is not primarily geography—colonial, imperial, liberal-democratic, indigenous or otherwise—but models of ecclesiological and theopolitical authority. If all historical forms of Christianity are always already "inculturated" (i.e., indigenized), is it not time to reform the cultural imaginary of inculturation toward an imaginary of interculturation? If polycentricity is a hallmark of World Christianity, then its correlates can be expected to also manifest as polycentricity in doctrine, ecclesial polity, liturgy, and spirituality.

Despite deploying the ageing trope of inculturation, Tomáš Halík has recently called attention to the phenomenon of "ex-culturation" of Christianity in Europe and, presumably, the "West" in general: "We can speak of ex-culturation where the Christian faith, or its external form, the Church and its ways of expression, lose credibility, clarity and fruitfulness" with the growing numbers of "apatheists" in the "West" who "are indifferent to faith because they have never encountered a Christianity that speaks in a language they can understand and believe …

[14] See *Majority World Theology: Christian Doctrine in Global Context*, ed. Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K.K. Yeo (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2020).

beyond the infantile form of faith [when] no one offered them a mature faith for adult people."[15] At the same time, as Barreto observes, while not ignoring the

> socioeconomic, ethnic, and political divides, the constant movement of peoples, ideas, and cultures has blurred many of the borders in the present world. Some of the most vibrant Christianities in Europe and North America … have their origins in the South. Today, the flux of Christian missionaries is no longer unidirectional. Lay and ordained missionaries are moving from the South to the North, on top of vivid South-South interactions.[16]

Verdicts may differ if this is what is actually happening "on the ground" at the current moment of intense global migration of people and ideas in various denominational contexts across the continents. What is theologically important to ponder, I submit, is to ask what imaginaries of ecclesial and doctrinal power and what axiologies of orthodoxy and faithfulness may be most life-giving and reconciling under the emerging horizons of Christian polycentricity and multilaterality? For both the Two-Thirds World and the One-Third World, what are the practical implications for life and faith under the aegis of such polycentricity when the already receding modern and colonial hierarchies of theological normativity may soon reverse?

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[15] Tomáš Halík, "Keynote address at the Thirteenth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) "One Body, One Spirit, One Hope" September 14, 2023," in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 63, no. 4 (2024): 3.

[16] Raimundo C. Barreto Jr., "Introduction: World Christianity as Public Religion," *World Christianity as Public Religion,* World Christianity and Public Religion Series, eds. Raimundo Barreto Jr., Ronaldo Cavalcante, Wanderley P. da Rosa (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017), 3.

With experiences of and commitments to being Christian today often being strikingly diverse, what new models of a "unity in diversity" and what models of reconciliation and conviviality might be able to facilitate the polycentric realities that World Christianity already affirms as a present reality? What new forms of "inter"—nonhegemonic, nonimperial, nonreductive—"culturation" and what new multilateral doctrinal imaginaries might infuse new life into the sputtering ecumenical endeavors toward any meaningful expression of "a Christianity united within itself for the common witness to the Gospel"[17] in our present historico-cultural moment when resentful identitarian ideologies proliferate across virtually all terrains of increasingly convoluted processes of globalization?

World Christianity and Its Encounters with Interreligious and Postcolonial/Decolonial Realities

Phan's essay does not explicitly engage with either postcolonial or decolonial inquiries from historical, critical, or constructive angles. He does devote significant attention to interreligious dialogue and its potential outcomes involving "reconsideration of the basic Christian beliefs" (e.g., the Trinity) as well as "collaborative work for the common good"[18] among other traditional aspects of interfaith dialogue. He calls for appreciation of the planetary religious pluralism which all religious communities inhabit at the present time and underscores the need for critical self-examination of Christian claims of spiritual superiority, especially in geopolitical contexts where Christians are religious minorities.[19] In this situation, Phan argues,

[17] Phan, "World Christianity," 175.

[18] Phan, "World Christianity," 183.

[19] Phan, "World Christianity," 186.

"intercultural and interreligious dialogue becomes urgent not simply for the survival of Christianity but also for the sake of justice and world peace."[20] The nature of Christian mission decisively changes as well: "Dialogue is the basic and only *modality* in which mission is to be carried out"[21] under the planetary horizon of religious plurality which amplifies but also provincializes the internal Christian polycentricity—already present or emerging, depending on how these processes are assessed in various geocultural locations—if it is perceived through the lens of World Christianity. Phan's conclusion has been echoed and amplified by other voices. What is more recent is an emerging argument in the early third decade of the twenty-first century for intentionally going beyond the traditional twentieth-century paradigms of interreligious dialogue, and now leaning into the paradigm of interreligious learning. The late Anselm Min recently noted that the need for interreligious learning is "compelling as the process of globalization has been bringing different religions together into common existential space and pressuring them to learn to live together with a minimum of justice and understanding."[22] Engaging with Chinese Christianity, Easten Law and Joel D. Daniels have argued that the posture of interreligious learning within the broader arena of World Christianity consists in "asking what open, intentional, and humble learning from religious others might provide Christians to illuminate and enrich the beliefs and practices of the church" and that such learning

[20] Phan, "World Christianity," 186.

[21] Phan, "World Christianity," 187; emphasis in the original.

[22] Anselm Min, "Learning from Another Religion: Some Methodological Reflections," *Journal of World Christianity* 13, no. 2 (2023): 81.

is "different from interreligious dialogue in that it prioritizes a posture of listening over speaking."[23]

Moreover, there is a growing relevance of courageous exploration of religious differences as part of the interreligious learning posture. As Deanna Ferree Womack has demonstrated in her *Neighbors: Christians and Muslims Building Community*, this requires a new level of nuanced interactions on theoretical and practical levels to grapple with the diversity of religious truth claims (like Phan actually called for in his 2012 essay and has explored in several other publications[24]) beyond the areas of more facile agreement, which then may successfully facilitate movement "toward higher stages of interreligious awareness" but also, most importantly, "away from confrontational responses."[25] Such increasingly nuanced appreciation of interreligious dialogue and learning occurs not only on a scholarly level but also, equally importantly, on a practical and communal level of collaborative action to promote reconciliation, justice, and peaceful conflict resolution across continents. There is still much room for growth in World Christianity studies and its transdisciplinary meshwork of methodological frameworks in the area of interreligious engagements as there is in virtually all other fields of Christian theological inquiry.

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[23] Easten Law and Joel D. Daniels, "Introduction," in "Interreligious Learning in Chinese Christianity and Religions," ed. Easten Law and Joel D. Daniels, special issue, *Journal of World Christianity* 13, no. 2 (2023): 77.

[24] Phan, "World Christianity," 182.

[25] Deanna Ferree Womack, *Neighbors: Christians and Muslims Building Community* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2020), 120.

Nevertheless, World Christianity cannot be historically explored and constructively engaged sufficiently without an intentional, at least on some level, engagement with postcolonial and decolonial modes of historical, cultural, and theological analyses. Since 2012, a lot of work across many disciplines has already been done to bring World Christianity in direct conversation with transdisciplinary postcolonial and decolonial modes of inquiry. As the editorial vision for *The Journal of World Christianity* states, and as postcolonial and decolonial perspectives would agree, it is indeed the case that "World Christianity must not be reduced to 'Third World Christianity,' 'Christianity in the Global South,' or other such depictions of a European Christian 'other'" because there is "no single center" in World Christianity.[26] Postcolonial and decolonial perspectives can further appreciate the careful caveat that "to say that there is no single center is not to assert that knowledge, power, and understanding are evenly distributed across the globe" and this is why World Christianity is "particularly concerned with underrepresented and marginalized Christian communities" and with "migrants and minorities, and … the experience of women around the globe."[27]

The question of center/s and the models of power relations is pivotal for postcolonial and decolonial dimensions of the historical and theological studies within the horizon of World Christianity. Taking the shift to doing theology from within the horizon of World Christianity as a study of "multicentered world religious phenomenon"[28] seriously, postcolonial and decolonial theological trajectories are indispensable tools to foster the emergence of new constructive imaginaries that should come after, for example, the timely and necessary first steps in the

[26] Front matter of *The Journal of World Christianity*. See, for example, 14, no. 1 (2024).

[27] Front matter of *The Journal of World Christianity*.

[28] Front matter of *The Journal of World Christianity*.

deconstructive direction of "decentering Europe in theology".[29] Early developments in the third decade of the twenty-first century are promising: for example, the Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network [EIIRN], which is closely associated with the scholarly movement of studying World Christianity, held its fourteenth international conference in the summer of 2022 in San Juan, Puerto Rico, at the Universidad Interamericana de Puerto Rico with the participation of El Seminario Evangélico de Puerto Rico. The conference was dedicated to the theme of "Decolonizing Churches."

For many European and Euro-American theologians, working within the North Atlantic milieu, a meaningful encounter with the postcolonial dimensions and decolonial exigencies of the World Christianity paradigm may well involve nothing short of what Aaron Hollander described as "exorcistic disorientation of our assumed righteousness" at the "Decolonizing Churches" conference by underscoring the urgency of examining and confronting one's respective "interpretive chauvinism and political collusion" *vis-à-vis* the particular histories of colonial marginalization and dehumanization where all theologians find themselves today.[30] This thrust resonated with many contributions at the San Juan conference coming from theologians across the globe where many One-Third World theologians of diverse backgrounds and

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[29] See one such line of inquiry in Kirsteen Kim's informative chapter "World Christianity Curricula: A Perspective from Missiology/Mission Studies" in the wide-ranging collection of essays that survey many leading workstreams in English-speaking World Christianity studies during the second decade of the twenty-first century, *World Christianity: History, Methodologies, Horizons*, ed. Jehu J. Hanciles (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2021), 44–60.

[30] Aaron T. Hollander, "Decolonizing Churches as Emancipation and Exorcism," *The Journal of World Christianity* 13, no. 1 (2023): 60.

denominational affiliations wrestled with the "epistemological detritus that accrues from lifetimes of assumed centrality, universality, and supremacy"[31] in open-ended and often challenging conversations with their Two-Thirds World counterparts and representatives of the North American and Caribbean Indigenous communities. Hollander, like Kim and others, also foregrounds the need to "decenter" hegemonic structures of authority and the surrounding "haze of self-congratulation" in favor of what a meaningful polycentricity requires—an intentional and context-specific engagement with the "difficult decolonial blessings" which cannot avoid being "purgative"[32] yet may not yield immediate and effortlessly predictable transformations in theological work as well as in the contested public arenas in which all present incarnations of World Christianity function. Part of such transformations will need to include the methodological presuppositions that conventionally pack away the "contextual" engagement with key Christian theological concepts, doctrines, rites, and spiritual practices to the last sections of systematic theologies. Usually, it happens under the same old "inculturation" paradigm under which "contextualization" tacitly means adaptation and appropriation in the peripheries/margins of something that has originated in and is managed by some distant "center."

To unsettle and exorcise the "detritus" (Hollander) and move the practice of theologizing within the horizon of World Christianity toward transformative entanglements with other fields

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[31] Hollander, "Decolonizing Churches," 61. A collection of expanded versions of papers given at the EIIRN San Juan conference can be found in two volumes edited by Raimundo C. Barreto and Vladimir Latinovic: *Decolonial Horizons: Reshaping Synodality, Mission and Social Justice* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2023) and *Decolonial Horizons: Reimagining Theology, Ecumenism and Sacramental Praxis* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2023).

[32] Hollander, "Decolonizing Churches," 61.

of theological studies, one-dimensional versions of decentering will not do. Simple reversals or romantic idealizations of presumably more "authentic," more animated and allegedly more viable strands of Christianity will also not do. Or, equally importantly, sweeping demonizations of difference in theological conceptualities, worship practices, theological anthropologies, and ecclesiological habits is of little practical use in our rampantly polarized cultural moment when the urgency of engendering imaginaries of a livable planetary future is a shared concern for all religions and all varieties of Christian faith and practice.

In the circumstances of surging religious nationalisms and amidst the entrenching global socioeconomic inequities that add fuel to various manifestations of the present "age of anger,"[33] postcolonial and decolonial modes of theologizing can provide toolkits for critical and constructive examination of theological methodologies and ecclesial practices. One such toolkit is Kwok Pui-lan's version of postcoloniality. Kwok is less sanguine than Phan (at least in his 2012 essay) about the end of Christendom.[34] She argues that the decolonization of theological imagination requires an ongoing disengagement with the structures and habits of Christendom. She proposes three vectors to advance such a decolonization: First, "to investigate how Christian symbols and doctrines have borrowed from imperial cultures and in turn contributed to the production and reinforcement of empire."[35] This task is well underway in many postcolonial and decolonial theological trajectories. World Christianity would do well to engage with these theological lineages in a more intentional and sustained way. Second, "we must look for

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[33] Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2017).

[34] See Phan, "World Christianity," 173.

[35] Kwok, Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Politics and Theology: Unraveling Empire for a Global World* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021), 94.

alternative sources and lift up forgotten, silenced and repressed voices in the theological tradition."[36] This effort is also underway, especially in the studies of Christian histories. Third, "decolonizing theology needs to construct forward-looking, life-affirming, anti-imperial, and anti-oppressive theology that provides clues and guides for the future."[37] This vector is particularly consequential for World Christianity as a vigorous and genuinely theological—and not just historical, sociological, or ethnographic—field. The boldest and most consequential contributions of World Christianity, working toward what Phan saw as an urgent need not only for the survival of Christianity but for "justice and world peace," will necessitate sustained and soul-searching interchanges with Kwok's third constructive reforming vector: decolonizing Christian theology. If these contributions materialize, such robust engagements with postcolonial and decolonial imaginaries will shape World Christianity and help it mature into a life-giving, auspiciously undulating, and polycentric web of faithfulness. In this regard, a long road is ahead for us, both as theologians and practitioners, wherever we may live, work, pray, and minister to give witness to, in Phan's words, "the faithfulness and loving mercy of God—God's *emet* and *hesed*."[38]

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[36] Phan, "World Christianity," 94.

[37] Phan, "World Christianity," 94.

[38] Phan, "World Christianity," 188; emphasis in the original.